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ABSTRACT

What are the thoughts of exemplary teachers from high poverty schools on linguistic diversity and cultural responsiveness? What do inner-city children say about their best teachers? In focus groups, faculty and students from high poverty schools were asked about the qualities and characteristics of exemplary urban teachers. One focus group consisted of three urban elementary school teachers, and the other was made up of six middle and secondary school students. Analyses of their discussions reveals that exemplary teachers are passionate and committed to children's learning. They hold high expectations for all children's learning. Although sensitive about issues of linguistic diversity, the exemplary teachers believe all children must learn the dominant code. Unlike teachers in other studies of exemplary urban faculty, the teachers in this study did not participate in community activities. Yet, they connected with children by constructing personal and caring places for learning, making learning exciting with varied activities, integrating cultural knowledge through literature, using humor, conducting field trips, and sometimes inviting children to their homes and communities. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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Teaching in High Poverty, Urban Schools -- Learning from Practitioners and Students

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Abstract

What are the thoughts of exemplary teachers from high poverty schools about linguistic diversity and cultural responsiveness? What do inner city children say about their best teachers? Using focus groups we asked faculty and students from high poverty buildings about the qualities and characteristics of exemplary urban teachers. Analyses of their discussions revealed that exemplary teachers are passionate and committed to children's learning. They hold high expectations for all children's learning. Although sensitive about issues of linguistic diversity, the exemplary teachers believe all children must learn the dominant code. Unlike studies of other exemplary urban faculty, the teachers in this study did not participate in community activities. Yet, they connected with children by constructing personal and caring places for learning, making learning exciting with varied activities, integrating cultural knowledge through literature, using humor, conducting field trips, and sometimes inviting children to their homes and communities.

These are not your ordinary teachers -- they do not fit the pattern of what usually happens with faculty in high poverty schools. That is, they have not burned-out or transferred to other buildings after a few years of classroom teaching. Rather, the teachers in this group have consciously chosen to spend their entire careers with children of poverty. Moreover, they do not lament years gone by when the neighborhood families were more intact and part of the working or middle-class. Instead the teachers speak positively about children, families, and schools. They concentrate on how they can make a difference in their students' learning. In addition, teachers are actively involved in a variety of curriculum activities in their building and district.

Last year we surveyed 36 highly effective teachers from low income schools in three districts (McDermott, Rothenberg, & Gormley, 1998). We wanted to know what motivated them and why they did not use their seniority to transfer to middle class buildings. Our results indicated that these teachers had a love for children that sustained and nourished their motivation and enthusiasm to teach. They felt good about their decisions to be teachers, and they had a sense of efficacy and empowerment when in their classrooms. They collaborated with other teachers in their buildings, and they viewed knowledge as a constructive process. These teachers were "passionate" about their subject matter and viewed teaching as a caring and nurturing activity. They identified more with children and colleagues in their buildings than with outside professional organizations.

However, our survey results also suggested a problem. The exemplary teachers in last year's survey did not reveal qualities associated with cultural responsiveness which has been found to be so important in other research (Dyson, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994). That is, although the teachers reported rich involvement in countless school projects and events, they did not discuss issues of cultural integration or community connectedness in their teaching.

We knew the teachers lived in middle class communities and commuted everyday to the schools where they taught. Their communities were far different than the locations of the inner city schools where problems of unemployment, violence and substance abuse proliferated. Equally

important the teachers in our study were all white and of European descent, whereas many of their children were African and Hispanic.

In this study, we clarify results of our last year's work with exemplary teachers in high poverty schools by using focus groups to examine the following issues:

- What are the qualities and skills of effective teachers in high poverty schools?
- What qualities and skills do effective and experienced practitioners recommend as most important for new teachers to acquire?
- What are children's perspectives about the qualities of their effective teachers?

Review of Related Literature

Pressley, Rankin, & Yakoi (1996) surveyed 89 highly effective primary grade teachers to learn how they taught children to read and write. They found that these teachers integrated skill instruction with authentic literacy activities. The teachers reported a balance of skill instruction with integrated reading and writing. Wharton-McDonald et al. (1996) conducted an observational study of five highly effective first grade teachers. The results of this study again point to the importance of teachers balancing skill with authentic literacy experiences. These exemplary teachers skillfully integrated a variety of concepts and skills into each of their lessons. As expected, the exemplary teachers were highly skilled classroom managers and held high expectations for all children's learning.

Knapp (1995) studied 140 experienced teachers in high-poverty schools. The schools he selected were chosen because of their "better than average" performance on conventional testing measures. Of these teachers Knapp found one-third used conventional basic skill instruction, but he found another third placed advanced thinking skills (teaching for meaning) as the focus of their instruction. Knapp found that teachers in high poverty schools placed a consistent and sustained emphasis on alternatives to conventional skill instruction in reading, writing, and math. He argues that factors within a building can buffer and sustain teacher autonomy and effectiveness (e.g.,

mentor teachers, effective principals, etc.). A delicate balance, he explained, must be struck between professional support, autonomy, and pressure to change teaching practices.

Collinson (1994) reviewed the research about exemplary teachers personal characteristics. She found that three personal attributes repeatedly appeared in the research: (1) exemplary teachers exhibit a love for continuous learning, (2) they have an ethic of care for children and (3) they have a love for teaching. In addition they are seen as creative, enthusiastic, and intellectually curious with positive attitudes about themselves and children. Chester & Beaudin (1996) and Riehl & Sipple (1996) found that some teachers are more effective than others because of their sense of efficacy when in their classrooms. Effective teachers in all of these studies derived great personal satisfaction from seeing children learn.

Haberman (1995) and Weiner (1993) investigated the personal qualities and characteristics of exemplary teachers in high poverty schools. They found that the teachers' personal characteristics accounted for most of their effectiveness with low income children. Empathy and enthusiasm for children and an eagerness to teach the disadvantaged represent some of their qualities. Furthermore, exemplary teachers exhibit a willingness to learn children's cultural backgrounds, display an awareness of their personal biases and prejudices, hold high expectations for all students' learning, and they are adept at handling school bureaucracies.

Haberman (1995) claims that 80% of effective teaching lies with teachers' personal characteristics. Consequently, he recommends that teacher education programs carefully screen candidates for these personal qualities as a condition of acceptance into their schools. The candidate selection process is more important, according to Haberman, than the actual teacher preparation program. He argues that teachers of the urban poor be selected from an older candidate pool (over 30 years of age) who have a proven ability of establishing rapport with low income children. Haberman identifies adeptness at handling school bureaucracies, high expectations for all children's learning, collaboration with other teachers, persistence in situations characterized by violence and death, a predisposition to engage in coaching instead of more didactic models of

teaching, and an appreciation of student effort over ability as characteristics of exemplary teachers.

Dyson (1997) and Ladson-Billings (1994) identify cultural responsiveness and community connectedness as essential qualities of effective urban teachers. Exemplary urban teachers participate in community events and are knowledgeable of children's cultural backgrounds. The teachers believe they make a difference in children's lives and view their classrooms as homes away from home. That is, they feel they can construct rich and positive classroom learning environments for all children, regardless of the poverty of their homes and community. In addition, these teachers obtain encouragement and satisfaction from interacting with colleagues in their buildings.

The teachers in our study revealed some of the qualities described by Haberman (1995), Chester (1994), Collinson (1994), and Riehl & Sipple (1996). The teachers held high expectations, felt efficacious in the classroom, loved teaching and children, and they were flexible and resilient when faced with inertia from school bureaucracies. However, they did not discuss a sense of cultural responsiveness and involvement with the low-income communities where they taught -- this is why we conducted the present study.

Method

We used focus groups as our research method because they been shown to be a valid and economical way to collect data (Krathwohl, 1997). Two focus groups comprise this study. One of our focus groups consisted of three urban elementary teachers. The teachers came from different elementary buildings in two districts and their average classroom experience was well over 20 years. We selected these three teachers largely because of their willingness to sit with us and discuss issues of urban teaching. However, these teachers came from a larger group who participated in last year's written survey. At that time we independently prepared lists of exemplary teachers working in the high poverty schools we wanted to study. When a teacher's name appeared on both of our lists, that teacher was asked to complete our survey. With a few of the elementary buildings where we had less knowledge, we asked informants to prepare short lists of exemplary

teachers; when a teacher's name appeared on both the informant's and one of researcher's list, that teacher was asked to participate. We only asked tenured teachers to participate in our survey. The poverty levels of the schools where the teachers worked (New York State Education Department, 1998) ranged 83% to 90%. African American and Latino children represented one third to one half the student population in these buildings.

Six middle and secondary school students formed our second focus group. All of the students lived in low-income, public housing adjacent to our college. The students had attended elementary buildings of the teachers in our survey. These six students participated in an after school arts and literacy project. Five of the children were African American and one was Latina. We met with the students on one occasion in Spring of 1998. The students volunteered to participate and had known the researchers from the faculty's work in the literacy project over the years. We met on the college campus. The students sat is a circle where the researchers posed open-ended questions about their memories of favorite elementary teachers.

Three Exemplary Teachers

The three teachers, Meg, Diane, and Dorothy, taught in high poverty buildings most of their careers. Meg began teaching in the city's alternate learning program before transferring to her current building. She has 22 years of classroom teaching experience and has taught first grade in her building for 14 years. She teaches language arts and an inclusion course regularly for our college and has been a cooperating teacher with whom we have worked for most of this time. Ten years ago Meg was particularly active and vocal in district-wide curriculum project, but she became frustrated when the administrators discredited her recommendations and efforts. Over the summer, Meg obtained a teacher mentor position with the district and was no longer teaching first grade.

Dorothy is a first grade teacher with whom we have closely worked for many years. Her building is located adjacent to low-income public housing. She taught first grade for 25 years and has served as a cooperating teacher for us for much of that time. Her quiet manner and gentle approach to classroom management makes her, as well as the other teachers, a wonderful model

for novice teachers. When we asked her why she has stayed in this particular building for as long as she has, she first replied she has "too much stuff to move." As we talked, she related more and more about her commitment to children who begin school with many strikes against them, particularly in their literacy development.

Diane had been a classroom teacher in another large city school district for nearly 25 years. She has taught in both high poverty and middle income schools; this year she provided teacher inservice and curriculum development in her district's low-income buildings. One of these buildings recently obtained undesired national publicity when a conservative political group offered parents several thousand dollars toward tuition payment if their children attended private schools. Many parents moved their children to private schools, but it was common local knowledge that within one year most of the children had returned to the public elementary school. The cash advance did not cover the full tuition, and the private schools did not provide support services for special learners. In addition, many of the families were unusually mobil, sometimes moving several times from one part of the city to another within the same school year.

Data Collection and Analysis

The teacher focus group met after-school on May 15 and October 16, 1998. The student focus group met on June 15, 1998. Prior to each group meeting the researchers prepared a series of questions to ask the teachers and students. For the teachers, our questions explored issues about cultural responsiveness, language diversity, and methods of teaching in income schools. For the students we constructed questions eliciting their thoughts and experiences about their favorite elementary teachers.

After each focus group we analyzed and compared notes to identify issues with which we had confidence or needed clarity. Initially we wanted to better understand the teachers' thoughts about language and dialect differences in learning to read, parental involvement, cultural diversity, and strategies for preparing new teachers for low-income schools. Consequently, we re-asked the teachers the same questions during the May and October focus groups. We frankly told the

teachers our need to clarify our understandings about their positions on these issues. For example, we told them that their May response about children's language seemed contradictory because they spoke about celebrating children's language but also about correcting their speech and writing. The teachers were good natured about this paradox and eagerly elaborated their points of view. With the students we asked them about their favorite teachers, and why these teachers were their favorites.

During each focus group one researcher assumed primary responsibility for facilitating discussion and the other took notes. We changed research roles whenever the flow of discussion merited it. Our notes consisted of verbatim, paraphrased, and reflective notations about the teachers' and students' comments. Later we filled in our notes and compared them to establish discourse validity. We analyzed the notes by using emerging categories and hypotheses, as well as constant comparison for emerging patterns and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

We present our results according to the categories that emerged during our analyses. These pertain to the teachers' views about language, parents, children's learning, cultural connections, and preparing new teachers for high poverty schools. The last section presents the students' responses about their best elementary teachers.

Teachers' Views about Language

The teachers revealed complex views about children's language and dialect differences. On the one hand they voiced a commitment to respect language differences, but on the other there was a comparable need to teach children conventional English. The teachers thought that poverty and family life styles, in which they believed children spent many hours watching television, interfered with children's language development.

They unanimously asserted that it was their responsibility to teach standard English -- this belief propelled their classroom interactions. Meg explained, "We know children have to fit into the world and their language needs to be acceptable by others in order for them to fit in. Yet,

humanistically, we also must honor them as individuals and gradually bring them further in their knowledge and language" (Focus Group: October 16, 1998). Meg explained, "There is still a real need for children learning conventional language ... Society expects it...it is important that children learn the standard. Lisa Delpit says you need to honor neighborhood language, but the children also need to know how to choose or switch to the other mode. Children need to have the ability to make the choice. Our responsibility is to present children with choices. I spend a lot of the day correcting their expressions... It is effective" (Focus Group: May 15, 1998). The teachers suggested that conventional English was a second language for many of the children. Meg said her first graders used idioms that were not easily understandable. For example, the children frequently said, "So, don't I." Diane added, "We can't let those language patterns go uncorrected...(but) I usually correct them with humor" Finally, the teachers also displayed a very positive view about their children's language growth -- "Wonderful things happened over the course of the year" (Focus Group: May 15, 1998).

The teachers believed that children's ethnic histories influenced how they addressed classroom language. All the teachers said they corrected children's language when it was not in conventional code. They said they used games to help children learn mainstream ways of speaking. They felt strongly that children needed to learn the mainstream code to succeed in society. Yet they were sensitive to the interconnections between language and self-esteem. Meg argued a point with which the other teachers agreed: "I think that if you are working with a group of people whom you know have been denigrated, you may be more accepting of their language patterns...context is important, perhaps a big part of it. We have to know how the language is presented and the setting in which it occurs" (Focus Group: October 16, 1998).

Language delay, the teachers argued, accounted for the children's learning difficulties.The teachers attributed the delay to excessive hours in front of TV's with little interaction with others. They thought there was little talk at home. Meg explained that at the beginning of the year "...the children had difficulty putting words together for a coherent thought" (Focus Group: May 15,

1998).

One of the their suggestions for improving children's language was to have more speech and language people working in their classrooms as well as giving new teachers more knowledge about language development. Meg explained, "The use of literature by speech and language people is much better now. They don't separate the two anymore. There is a whole field connecting language with literature, articulation, hearing, comprehension, and writing" (Focus Group: October 16, 1998).

Teachers' Views about Parents

The teachers voiced strong points of view about the importance of parental involvement in children's education. Yet as they discussed this issue they realized the mobility of low-income urban people contributed to their lack of involvement in school activities -- families often moved from one low-income neighborhood to another during the school year. Diane said that the composition of children in many classrooms changes by half over the course of an academic year. The teachers sensed that parents become more resigned and removed from the impersonal forces of the educational system, which is often unresponsive to their children's learning needs.

Frustration characterized many of the teachers' statements about parental involvement. "We have trouble getting them in to conferences... They are always working," Meg complained (Focus Group: May 15, 1998). The teachers acknowledged the importance of involving parents in family literacy events, but they admitted they did not have success with it. "We need to teach parents again...we have tried [to teach them about literacy activities]. But many of the parents are so young, and they are afraid to come to school because of their own [poor] school experiences" (Focus Group: May 15, 1998).

Dorothy gave specific examples of parental involvement from her school's recent Open House: "At Open House this year I only had five out of 19 parents attend. Last year it was worse, with only one parent attending. So, I don't know" (Focus Group: October 16, 1998).

Teachers shared their frustration about involving parents with homework. Children asked

the teachers to write their parents notes about helping them at home. There were no anecdotes revealing successful events in which parents participated in school events or became more involved in family literacy activities at home.

A sense of community history and membership contributed to parental involvement in children's schooling. Dorothy explained that the transiency of families, as well as their alienation from the educational system, explains the lack of urban family involvement in school events. "Maybe the difference is that in my school's community the families are transitional. Parents are new to the community and many of them move in and out of it (over the course of the school year)... I know the neighborhood school concept helps a great deal, but it is still a problem getting parents to participate in school activities (Focus Group: May 16, 1998).

The teachers concurred in their belief that family involvement in children's education is an increasing problem. There was general deterioration in family involvement as children progress through school. "In first grade, parents are actively involved ... they are still clinging to their children. But in a few years they have bought into the system and they have accepted their children's problems and accepted the system [for good and bad] (Focus Group: October 16, 1998).

Expectations about Children's Learning

The teachers revealed strong and positive beliefs about children's learning. Unlike many teachers from high poverty schools who blame parents and/or the environment for children's learning difficulties, this group of teachers held high standards for children's learning. All of the teachers agreed with the comment (Focus Group: May 15, 1998), "All the children are going to leave my classroom reading!" Similarly, after Meg shared her frustration about getting parents to attend school conferences, she said she would no longer accept excuses (Focus Group: may 15, 1998): "They may have good excuses for not coming to school, but they are not good enough for me anymore! " Yet at the same time, she voiced her feelings that it was her responsibility to make sure children learn in her classroom. She did not scapegoat and said that she frequently wakes up

at 4 in the morning to plan ideas for her teaching.

Connecting Children's Cultural Backgrounds to Classroom Learning

There were many interesting comments about integrating children's cultural experiences into the classroom. Meg matter of factly said, "You have to include children's language into your teaching... at my school we have 28 ESL children from Asia, Africa, and South American countries...schools are getting more students from other countries and teachers are incorporating these cultural experiences into their lessons" (Focus Group: October 16, 1998). Dorothy elaborated, "It is the right thing to do. A few years ago several of our teachers received a teacher grant for "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" (Focus Group: October 16, 1998). This was a faculty and student collaboration to study cultural and ethnic differences in their schools.

The teachers discussed the importance of selecting literature that illustrated the children's cultural backgrounds. Dorothy gave one example of tying literature to children's linguistic backgrounds, "There is a book I like to read to my children, it is by Lois Erhart and it is bilingual (Focus Group: October 16, 1998).

They emphasized the importance of integrating children's cultural knowledge throughout the curriculum. Diane explained that she used social studies to discuss children's cultural backgrounds by using music, food, literature, dance. ..and guest speakers. I even integrate cultural knowledge into science," Diane added (Focus Group: May 15, 1998).

Advice for Preparing New Teachers

The teachers provided specific advice for preparing new teachers: (1) lengthen the student teaching experience, (2) develop mentoring programs, (3) select exemplary cooperating teachers, (4) improve communications between university and cooperating teachers (5) and provide prospective teachers with stronger backgrounds in child development, speech, and language.

The teachers emphasized the importance of new teachers having more time in classrooms. "Six weeks of student teaching is not enough!" Meg explained. Diane spoke positively of the impact of mentoring programs, and she shared her memory of a mentoring program at one of her

district's elementary schools. This school, she explained, typically had a high turn-over of teachers each year. Consequently, there were many new and inexperienced teachers in the building. Diane said, "There is nothing stronger than mentoring, teacher to teacher." It was a successful program but sadly has been discontinued.

The teachers stressed the need for selecting cooperating teachers who serve as good models for students. A word that recurred was that the cooperating teachers needed to be "positive" in their modeling and interactions with children. Unfortunately, the teachers knew of situations where this was not the case.

The teachers complained about inadequate college and university involvement in student teaching. "The college's expectations are less than our's," Diane asserted. She related the case where a college supervisor did not expect a male primary grade teacher to be nurturing with children, and Diane thought this was terribly wrong. Diane added further advice for teacher education programs: "I don't like student teachers who are working outside of the classroom -- we are giving false information (about teaching) by allowing this."

Students' Thoughts about Best Elementary Teachers

The students identified basic qualities of kindness and caring in the teachers they liked best. The students spoke about their favorite teachers making personal connections with them. Their favorite teachers created time to speak personally with them. The teachers took children on field trips and invited chidlren to their homes for picnics and barbecues.

The connections the favorite teachers made involved opening-up their own lives and homes to the children, but it did not to go the other way. That is, the students only spoke of one event in which teachers visited their neighborhood and that was an annual arts festival held downtown each spring near the housing project. The children talked about seeing their favorite teachers at this event.

Speaking to children personally and not yelling at them distinguished their favorite teachers from others. Humor and using a variety of learning activities were additional qualities that the

children appreciated. Workload did not seem to affect the students' judgements about their favorite teachers. One of the students talked about a teacher that "pushed" them with a lot of homework, but the student liked the teacher because she learned so much from him. Another student discussed having different kinds of learning activities and not just following a book. Table I displays the positive qualities discussed by the children.

Table 1: Characteristics of Children's Favorite Teachers

- They do not yell
- They are funny
- They are nice
- Share their lives with children by invite children to their homes
- Talk personally to children
- Use a variety of learning activities

These are all personal characteristics with which the children identified and remembered. These characteristics point to the humanness of student-teacher interactions. They are fundamental qualities in which trusting relationships are established between teachers and children. These qualities serve to bridge age, ethnic, and economic differences between urban teachers and their children.

Discussion

What have we learned and how will our findings help us prepare new teachers? One of the most important findings from our focus groups was that exemplary teachers are highly passionate and committed to improving children's lives and developing their own teaching skills. They consistently spoke about the importance of believing all children will learn, and how no child would leave their first grade classroom without learning to read. They revealed similar high expectations when discussing parental involvement and preparing new teachers for high poverty buildings.

Students identified similar qualities in their favorite teachers. That is, their best elementary teachers were those who displayed caring and humanistic qualities. The best teachers interacted personally and warmly with them. These teachers often made connections with children by sharing

parts of their lives with them. Teachers took children on field trips and invited children to their homes. Children developed a healthy respect and care for teachers as individuals as a result of these experiences.

Teachers can make connections with children can by participating in children's communities or inviting children to share in their own. Teachers mus break-down institutional barriers by interacting compassionately with children. Our focus group indicates that children seek personal connections with their teachers. These relationships can be constructed by moving from traditional text-based instruction and creating exciting opportunities for children to learn outside of the classroom. Students frequenlty mentioned field trips and classroom humor as activities and qualities of their best teachers. Children enjoyed being in these teachers' classrooms. Children felt liked and special in these teachers classrooms.

The teachers were highly committed to teaching as a career. Each one of these teachers was actively involved in district-wide curriculum matters and/or college teaching. They were well informed about current issues in teaching. They could cite reference sources for their arguments, and they easily articulated current educational theories and practices.

Teacher education programs, they argued, should be more demanding of prospective teachers. They did not like student teachers having outside employment. Student teachers should spend an entire year with a cooperating teacher instead of the half year that is currently required in elementary education. They thought that colleges should offer greater depth in the teacher education curriculum by providing more course work in child development, speech and language. College supervisors should not bend in having high standards for student teachers, regardless of the circumstances.

Still, we found some important differences with our group of exemplary teachers in high poverty schools and those described in other research. One, with the exception of an annual arts fair, there was no evidence that teachers participated in the community served by the school. There was evidence that effective teachers invited children to their own communities and homes but this

did not work the other way. That is, teachers did not visit children's homes or partake in community life. Two, the teachers expressed more conventional views about dialect and language issues in learning to read. Although well aware of many of the provocative issues in dialect (e.g., ebonics), the teachers in the focus group believed it was their professional responsibility to teach children the dominant language code. They argued that children should have the choice of being able to switch language codes depending on their own social and personal needs. This was an issue in which they felt unequivocal.

However, the teachers spoke sensitively and personally about integrating children's cultural backgrounds into their classrooms. They used children's literature as an effective strategy for addressing cultural issues. Although they all believed it to be a good idea that new teachers as well as veterans participate and observe the urban neighborhoods in which children live, they lacked creative ideas for doing so. For instance, the teachers explained that they were largely unsuccessful at involving parents in school events, but perhaps there are other ways to make connections to children's families. This needs to be explored further.

In future research we plan to observe these exemplary teachers working in their classrooms. We want to learn how they make the decisions they do and which features of classroom interaction contribute to the decisions they make. In particular, we want to see how they integrate children's cultural backgrounds into classroom instruction. We plan to triangulate our data by interviewing parents of children from these high poverty school. What do parents think about the best teachers in these buildings?

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